

Heeding the Call
Mark 1:14-20
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You just never know in life, do you? It seems like the moment you think you've got it figured out, the moment you begin to believe things are going well, life reminds you that nothing can be taken for granted. Last Saturday evening, Sean and Susan Bracken went out to dinner at Noodles and Company with their kids, Grace and Sean Jr. A few hours later they were in a private consultation room at Children's Memorial Hospital, waiting to hear if Grace was going to survive the night.

She did, thankfully, miraculously, and has since survived a surgery to cut off the blood flow to the aneurysm in her brain. She still has a long road ahead of her, but the immediate threat has been treated. Who would have thought a week ago that this is what would be on our minds and in our hearts this morning?

It certainly raises a lot of questions for me. As I was working on the sermon for this scripture this week, the question that kept coming up was, "If the kingdom of God is near, why is Grace lying in Children's Memorial Hospital? If the kingdom of God is near, why are there so many names on our prayer list?"

When something like this happens to someone we love, questions of "why" are often the first things to come into our mind. I think this is especially true when it happens to a child. Grace didn't deserve this. The Brackens didn't do anything to bring this on themselves. There are millions of people in the world a lot more evil and deserving of hardship than them. Why?

I've been thinking about that question all week, and I don't have an answer. I don't know why things like this happen. They happen because that's life, and just living is a risky proposition. Whether it's MS or cancer or a drunk driver or just plain old age, something will get all of us one day.

The challenge for us is not avoiding the dangers of life – because they can't be avoided – but choosing how we respond to them. I learned another lesson in that area this week as I watched Sean and Susan deal with this overwhelming ordeal in their lives. I can't begin to imagine how they felt as they walked this journey, as they looked at their daughter lying in the hospital bed with tubes and monitors and machinery all around her.

But what I saw in them and in their family was this incredible sense of trust. They trusted in the nurses who were providing constant care for Grace. They trusted in the doctors who were going to be doing the procedure on Grace's brain. And they trusted in God.

I know that may sound flippant but I promise you there was nothing flippant about God's presence with the Brackens this week. Susan mentioned several times how she could feel everyone's prayers surrounding them. On Tuesday, after the procedure was finished, we had not one but two prayers of thanksgiving. Sean said to me, "You know, we've spent a lot of time asking God for things. I think we should be about thanking Him."

I don't believe that trust comes quickly or easily, but I do believe the Bible gives us a blueprint for how to build up our trust and faith in God. Jesus says it in our passage today: "Repent and believe." Turn from trusting in ourselves or in the world and trust in

God. Leave behind thoughts and behaviors that destroy life and turn to the God who has given us our lives. Repent and believe. Turn and trust.

That makes for good bumper sticker material, a nice slogan for a brochure. But thankfully Mark doesn't stop there. He gives us a first-hand account of what that looks like with the calling of Jesus' first disciples. Jesus calls to Simon and Andrew and James and John and says, "Follow me." And, strangely enough, they go.

Realize at this point in the story, those four men probably didn't have any idea who Jesus really was. He hadn't worked any miracles or delivered any sermons. And these men had other responsibilities to think about. They had families, they had jobs. They had 100 different reasons not to drop everything and follow this wandering prophet. And yet they went.

Talk about trust! I'm not sure about you, but I don't know that I would have responded the way they did. I might have been curious about what Jesus had to say, but I would probably want to ease into the situation a bit more slowly. Maybe I could put my name on a signup sheet for potential disciples or attend a potluck presentation on the Kingdom of God. Maybe if I waited a bit longer Jesus would offer a less rigorous category of auxiliary membership with which I could get the same rewards with such a radical commitment.

But Jesus isn't asking for our auxiliary membership. He's asking for our lives, our faith, our complete trust. I enjoy the intellectual part of faith. I would teach a Bible Study every day if I could. Understanding the theology beyond your beliefs is an important part of having faith. But being a disciple is about more than talking theology or praying an eloquent prayer. Being a disciple means that when we are faced with a crucial moment in our lives, we respond we trust. When we are called to serve, or when we are called to take a stand, or when we are called to have faith in a surgeon's skill, we respond with trust.

That trust is built upon faith, not knowledge or training. If a certain level of competence were required to be a follower of Jesus, I'm not sure any of us would make the cut. There's a lot to like about this Jesus guy, but he wouldn't make a very good headhunter for a company. As the pastor of this church I'm blessed to work with an incredibly skilled and delightful group of folks. Every person on staff here is hard-working and a joy to be around. But they are also very, very talented at what they do. Imagine me calling out to one of you to direct the choir in their anthem or provide childcare for our toddlers every week. Good luck! We have made it a point to hire people who are good at what they are hired to do.

But not Jesus. He needs to recruit 12 people to help him spread the word about God's kingdom here on earth. I'm thinking he needs a few marketing folks, maybe a motivational speaker, a few talented salespeople. So who does he recruit? A bunch of fishermen and tax collectors and other blue-collar workers. Really, Jesus? Have you seen these guys' resumes? Have you *smelled* your resumes?

But what Jesus knows is that God doesn't call those who are equipped; God equips those who are called. The only prerequisite to being a follower of Christ is a genuine desire to follow. After all, how do you prepare yourself to be a disciple? How do you prepare yourself to trust, no matter what life throws at you? We can't know what it's like to have faith in the midst of a crisis until we are in that crisis. Our trust is not built

upon knowledge or training; it is built upon a step-by-step journey of faith, a daily commitment to following Jesus.

And if we can commit to following Jesus in calm times, I believe we will be better equipped to following Jesus in the tumultuous times. I've had the privilege of working with Sean and Susan in a variety of capacities in the church. Susan is an Elder here and Sean has been on several mission trips. I have seen them put their faith into action, following Jesus' call to serve. And when the time came for them to trust God in a time of life and death, the faith they had cultivated over the years sustained them.

You may think it's easy for me to speak about this since everything so far has worked out well. Would I be talking about faith and trust and God's goodness had things not turned out so well? I believe I would. When we trust in God during difficult circumstances, we aren't trusting that everything is going to turn out OK. Not all children survive aneurysms. Not all cancer victims become cancer survivors. Trusting in God doesn't ensure that everything that we want to happen will happen. But what it *does* mean is that we believe God is with us through it all. Romans 8 says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to this purpose." That doesn't say God will make everything work out like we want. But it does say in ALL things God is at work.

I believe that. I can't explain it, no more than I can explain what the neurosurgeons did with Grace Bracken. But I don't have to understand it to believe in it and trust in it. The time will come for me and for each one of us when we face the same decision. Trust or not trust? Follow or not follow? Ignore the call or answer it? Keep living in our old ways or turn to a new one? How you respond, the faith you build and cultivate, starts with the choices you make today. Repent and believe. Turn and trust.